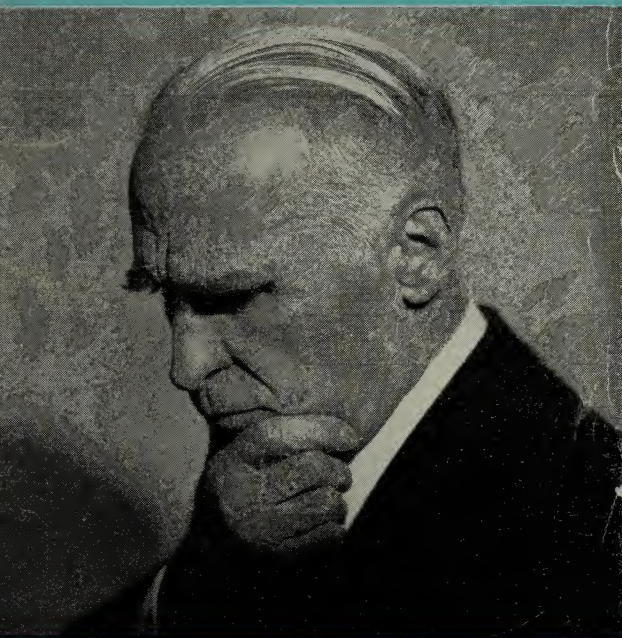


ONE GOD *or* THREE?



ONE GOD OR THREE?

by

RICHARD GINDER

It's been said in joke that the only thing any two Jews can agree on is how much a third Jew should contribute to the United Jewish Appeal. But there's a grain of truth in that jest. It is certainly pretty hard to know what the average Jew believes in religious matters. While Catholics and many Protestants have different prayers — creeds — providing a crisp summary of their beliefs, and Catholics in particular have a Pope empowered, like a supreme court, to settle disputed points for them, the Jewish people have no single person or agency that can walk

into a religious discussion between two Jews and say with authority, "You're right and he's wrong."

Hence a man is taking a lot on himself when he authors a book *What The Jews Believe*, as has Rabbi Philip Bernstein. For even though he is president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, one can be sure that his book will shock his fellow-Jews in hundreds of thousands, that its contents will be vehemently disowned by hundreds of earnest and devout rabbis throughout the country.

As Christians, we are mostly concerned with Rabbi Bernstein's gentle hint that we worship three gods while the Jew holds to the truth of one only God. Rabbi Bernstein doesn't come right out with it flat-footedly. It's a suggestion, an inference.

The Jews, he insists, have always believed in one God. Their most important prayer is the "Shema": "Hear, O Israel,

the Lord our God, the Lord is One." But then he goes on to say that "Although the Jews are able to understand Jesus, the Jew of Nazareth, they have never been able to understand or accept the idea of the Trinity. Down through the ages innumerable Jews suffered, and many were put to death for rejecting this church doctrine . . . Thus from the beginning of the Christian era . . . the Shema has been the rallying point of Jewish loyalty confronting the persecution or the blandishments of the daughter religion."

Ignorance of Christian Teaching

Those are weasel words. An uncharitable person might accuse Rabbi Bernstein of malice. We prefer to regard him as colossally ignorant of Christian beliefs. Had he taken the trouble to investigate Christian doctrine as accepted by Catholics, Orthodox, and the majority of Prot-

estants, he would have discovered the meaning of the Trinity together with the fact that we are just as loyal as the Jews in our adherence to a belief in one God.

What he classifies (in a tone that is faintly belittling) as church doctrine, is nothing less than fact, revealed by the Almighty God Himself. Rejection of truth in the face of clear proof is stubborn fanaticism rather than loyalty or reasoned conviction.

Put it this way: If I am blind and a man boosts me to his shoulders so that I can feel the leaves, twigs, and branches of a tree, I shall thank him. "I didn't know that those things had leaves, twigs, and branches," I might say. "Up until this, I had thought they were all trunk." But I could also turn to my friend and say, "I refuse to believe it. I have always thought of trees as being all trunk, and I shall go on thinking of them that way." It

would be insane of me, though, wouldn't it? And yet that's what the Jews have done in religion.

From the beginning, God spoke with them and showed Himself as one God. But there came a day when He came to earth and talked to us about that one God. He told us a great deal of what it's like on the other side of the grave. He knew. He was the only one who could know — the only one who ever stepped through the veil from eternity. He told us that the one God exists in three divine Persons, really distinct, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, equal in all things.

How did the Jews react? To this day they have clung to a portion of the truth, stubbornly closing their eyes to the rest of the facts: like a blind man who takes a trunk for the whole tree — who says "I acknowledge that man has arms, but I refuse to admit that he has fingers."

Obstinacy in Ignorance

That's not loyalty. That's obstinacy in ignorance. That's a refusal to be enlightened. That's fighting the truth. And when you resist religious truth, you resist God Himself.

Jesus knew the mind of His own people. He preached the doctrine of one God and taught us to pray the "Our Father." With the rest of the Jews, He prayed to His Father in heaven. But at the same time, He kept pushing the fact that He too — Jesus — is God: "The Father and I are one," He told His followers. "Philip, he that seeth me seeth the Father also. "He spoke like God, foretelling the future with precise accuracy and asserting that at the end of the world He would come on the clouds of heaven. He would send out His angels to round up every soul in the universe, and then He would judge those souls. And, by His miracles, He

acted like God: healing the sick, raising the dead, calming the storm, walking on the waters.

Toward the end of His public life, He spoke of still a Third Person, a Paraclete, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, whom He would send down upon His followers, God like Himself and the Father. Then just before returning to His Father, He told His apostles to "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

Here He puts the three Persons on one level. All three Persons are God, yet there is only one God.

To accept Jesus Christ as God is to accept the doctrine of the Trinity — not by any means three gods, but three Persons in the one Nature.

The Meaning of Nature and Person

If I ask *what* you are, you will tell me your nature. You will say, "I am not a stone, nor a rosebush, nor a horse, I am a human being. That is what I am — a being gifted with human nature."

But if I ask *who* you are, you will give me the label attached to your personality at birth: "I am Susan McGillicuddy, the one and only Susan McGillicuddy. In all the world there is no other exactly like me. I am unique." Which is true.

So we find that you are one distinct personality gifted with a human nature.

Now if we ask Jesus who He is, He tells us "I'm Jesus Christ" — one Person — in fact, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. But if we ask Him "What are You?" we get back a double answer: "I am a human being," He says, "but at the same time, I am God" — one Person with two natures, in other words. Being

God, He could walk on water; but being human, He ate when He was hungry.

Let's raise our face to the heavens now, and call out that basic question: "What's up there?"

The answer comes thundering back, "God" — not "gods." One God, one Divine Nature.

Let's ask a second question: "Who are You?"

And a threefold answer comes back: "I am the Father, I am the Son, I am the Holy Spirit" — three Persons.

(We could never have figured these things out for ourselves. We would never have known them if Jesus had not told them to us.)

Remember, now, this is a matter of fact, independent of our beliefs or preferences. Believe or reject as we may, God continues His existence in three Persons through all eternity.

The Heart of the Mystery

Mystery is involved in the total possession of the one Nature, by each of the three Persons. When Jim, Joe, and John get together, we have three persons and three natures. Each of them has his own nature. That is not true of the Blessed Trinity, and it makes up the mystery: three Persons each possessing the one Nature in its entirety.

There are those who think that the mystery consists in saying "Three equals one and one equals three." That would not be mysterious. That would be foolish. Actually, as we have seen, the mystery involves two things — nature and personality — as different as air and water.

And while it is a matter of fact, faith enters in by our acceptance of it on the bare say-so of Our Lord. It is not a truth that can be demonstrated in the laboratory. It can't be broken down with acids

or measured with a caliper. We *believe* Our Lord when He tells it to us. That calls for faith.

There is lots of room here for profitable meditation. But we must go slowly, always realizing our own limitations and guided always by the teachings of the Church. It is easy to get off on the wrong track.

Many centuries ago, for instance, one fellow got the idea that the Father was bound to be older than the Son. "There has to be a Father before there can be a Son," he reasoned. "Therefore the Son is not the equal of the Father, hence the Son is not God, and the doctrine of the Trinity goes out the window."

No Clocks in Heaven

It looks plausible until we recall that there is no time in eternity. There are no clocks in heaven. No undertaker straps

a wristwatch on a corpse. The words "Father" and "Son" express a relationship without any reference to time. The One "begets" or generates the Other. It's a process that has been going on through all eternity. There never was a time when the One was not begetting the Other. Our human speech best describes the One begetting and the One begotten as Father and Son. Christian philosophers call it a "subsistent relationship," the technical term for what we have just described.

This doctrine of the one God in three Persons is the cornerstone of Christian belief. From the dawn of Christianity, every Mass has been started and offered "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." We get up in the morning and go to bed at night with the same prayer on our lips. At least thirty times a day the Christian Church prays "Glory be to the Father, and to the

Son, and to the Holy Ghost." All our hymns end with the same thought — the doxology, as it is called.

The Orthodox Church is as zealous in accepting the Trinity as is the Catholic Church. And Protestants, too sing "Holy, holy, holy . . . God in three Persons, Blessed Trinity."

In closing, one can only repeat the thought that Rabbi Bernstein, implying that we Christians are less firm than the Jews in our loyalty to one God, showed a sad and, indeed, an unpardonable ignorance of the Christian Faith.

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